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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7380  
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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1047  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4594  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8136  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5697  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1499  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1451  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000258

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO  
PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: KAREN STATE: PEACE A PRIORITY IN THE REFERENDUM

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Classified By: Poloff Chelsia Wheeler for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Karens are deeply divided over whether or not to support the constitution in the upcoming May referendum. While most of the general population wants peace and opposes anything produced by the government, they live in fear of the consequences of voting no. Karen leaders also want peace, but fall on either side in the debate over what is the best means of obtaining it: supporting the regime's draft constitution or waiting for an improved version. End Summary.

Public Sentiment: Anti-Government, Pro-Peace  
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¶2. (C) During a March 28-30 trip to Hpa-An, Karen State, Poloff learned that almost all rural people, and a majority of those who live in the city, know very little about the upcoming referendum or the constitution. Most Karen are extremely poor and are far more interested in crossing the border into Thailand to obtain better work and higher pay, than with politics within their own country. The government has restricted the information flow into the area far more than it has in the urban areas of Rangoon and Mandalay. According to Nant Khin Htwe Myint of the Hpa-An NLD, internet cafe owners must keep detailed logs of their customers and report the names of all users to the police. They also charge around 3,000 kyat (USD 2.70) per hour of internet use, far more than an average daily salary in Hpa-An.

¶3. (C) Despite the lack of access to good information on the draft constitution and referendum, all of our contacts—including those who themselves support the constitution—agreed that the general public in Karen State will probably vote no. After more than fifty years of civil war during which the government has done nothing good for them, few Karens are likely to support anything that the regime proposes. According to Saw Lun Shein, a delegate to last summer's National Convention, Karens consider the referendum to be a chance to express their true feelings.

14. (C) Counterbalancing the strong opposition to the government is a lack of organization among opposition leaders and fear of reprisals for voting no. Other than simply asking people to support the constitution during the registration process, the government has done little to campaign in favor of the draft. Nevertheless, said Saw Lun Shein, the people still believe that the government will punish them somehow if they do not support the constitution. The opposition is just as disorganized as the government. Saw Lun Shein hoped that the traditional return of migrants from Thailand for the upcoming Water Festival would also bring information about the constitution from outside of the country, where people have regular access to a free press and the internet. There will be no formal activities, but he believed that conversations will start in private homes about the implications of the referendum, leading to wider awareness in the general population of the issues at stake.

#### Support the Constitution: Peace Over Freedom

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15. (C) Half of those we met with during the trip said that they will support the constitution in May. Major Victor, who fought in the KNU for 26 years before retiring to run a dialogue center at the Anglican Church in Hpa-An, said that the constitution would bring all Karen and other ethnics together and provide a starting point for meaningful dialogue. The first priority is peace, he asserted, and the constitution is the best means of doing away with arms and bringing people to the negotiating table. He believed the constitution offered a chance for the people to engage the military in the parliament, a necessary step on the road to democracy.

16. (C) Ashin Pinnya Thami, head monk of the influential Taunggalay Monastery and a strong sympathizer with the KNU, is also supportive, but far more cautious than Major Victor.

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He agreed that all Karen want peace and expressed his exhaustion from the long insurgency. He also saw this as a rare chance for the people to come forward and express their desires. Another chance to engage the government like this may not come for a long time, he said. He noted, however, that monks throughout the country will watch the polling process carefully and will not be afraid to speak out if the government manipulates the results to ensure approval. He harbored little confidence that the government would conduct the vote fairly.

#### Oppose the Constitution: Peace, Freedom Over Oppression

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17. (C) Nant Khin Htwe Myint of the NLD agreed that the government would probably cheat and emphasized the importance of expressing public opposition to a constitution drafted under unfair conditions. She estimated that 90 percent of the people in Hpa-An would vote against the constitution, but could not say anything about people in the villages. Only three miles outside of Hpa-An, she noted, very few people can even speak Burmese and therefore have even less access to information about the constitution. They will not be able to read the ballots in May, let alone make informed decisions.

18. (C) Saw Lun Shein will vote no. He believed that it was important to oppose the regime, even though he had no confidence that the conditions in the country would change after the referendum, regardless of the outcome. He also did not expect that the Karen would lead any opposition movements in response to an unfair referendum. The people here are tired of fighting, he said, and they live in more fear of government crackdown than other parts of the country. "They know what they should do," he said, but acting on that knowledge is another matter.

The View From Mawlamyine

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¶9. (C) During a brief stop in Mawlamyine, Mon State, on March 30, we met with Bishop Raymond Saw Poe Ray, who echoed much of what we heard in Karen State. He will support the constitution in the interests of peace, he said. The constitution will provide a crucial step on the road to democracy, but he also distrusts the government. Nevertheless, "we need evolution, not revolution," he asserted. The government will reform slowly and it will take time. While the Mon also feel oppressed, he said that they are tired of the fighting and want peace in whatever way it comes.

¶10. (C) Comment: After five decades of civil war, people understandably want peace. The referendum presents the question of whether this peace can come gradually, evolving from a flawed constitution or whether people should withhold their support until something closer to ideal comes along. In deciding between the two, fear of the Than Shwe regime will factor importantly in how they cast their votes in May. End Comment.  
VILLAROSA